Essay

Post-Cartesianism:
The Algorithm Before Thinking and Being

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Postcartesianismo: el algoritmo antes del pensar y del ser

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Introduction

"The algorithm before thinking and being."

The phrase sounds provocative. It is. And, I fear, it is also becoming more accurate each day.

Cartesian thought, as René Descartes formulated it in his Discourse on Method, bequeathed to us a mode of rational operation that proved extraordinarily fruitful. The human being, as a rational subject, could ground existence in a conscious act of thought: cogito, ergo sum. Reason stood as the primary instrument for accessing reality, and subjectivity as a legitimate tool for constructing knowledge, meaning, and identity.

For centuries, this vision provided an extraordinarily fertile framework. Through it, modern science was able to flourish and expand. The enlightened subject established himself as an autonomous agent, confronting a world that could at last be measured, explained, and understood.

But Descartes could not foresee that, in dismantling dogmas through reason, this very reason would eventually harden into a new dogma. Ideas, conceived as predecessors of reality, ended up being transformed into absolute truths that fueled ideologies. And, at times, those ideologies led to some of the greatest atrocities in history, as they sought to impose a single vision of the world upon the complexity of the real.

Human beings, in confronting ideas with reality, ended up granting priority to the idea—even at the cost of crudely distorting the experience of the world. Thought, instead of humbly adjusting itself to reality, tried to redefine it according to its own schemes.

Meanwhile, an invention arose that would alter the very conditions of thinking at their root: the calculating machine devised by Charles Babbage. From then on, the cognitive horizon began to shift, gradually yet inexorably. We entered the era of computation and vast chains of information. New capacities for collecting, processing, and storing data transformed the landscape of human knowledge.

Today, we live immersed in this information age, channeled and organized by systems of calculation which, through logical instructions—algorithms—solve problems and already operate beyond our human capacities. Before we think about an issue, before we form an opinion, even before we decide which aspect of reality deserves our attention, invisible algorithms have filtered, prioritized, and arranged the contents that feed our consciousness.

This phenomenological field in which our thinking takes place is now preconfigured by supra-human logics. Algorithms compensate for certain limitations of pure reason: it is no longer necessary to traverse a complete reflective process to obtain answers, since these are offered ever more immediately. The Cartesian subject, who once imagined grounding his being through

sovereign thought, is now traversed by flows of information that condition everything from perception to collective memory.

It is precisely in this context that it becomes necessary to propose a new reading of our cognitive condition. Here is where we introduce the concept of mixed post-Cartesianism: post-Cartesian, because the cogito can no longer be regarded as an original foundation in an environment where algorithmic mediation often precedes thinking itself; mixed, because the human phenomenon remains irreducible to the computable. Emotion, subjectivity, and personal history continue to operate—even as they are nourished and modulated by systems of information.

Our purpose is not to offer an apocalyptic diagnosis or a redemptive narrative. It is, more modestly, to better understand the condition of a thought that is no longer naively free, yet not completely determined either. To reflect on how a philosophy of lucidity might be sustained in times when the compass that orients our attention, our desires, and even our questions is, to a large extent, algorithmic.

It is important to understand, however, that this process is not a one-way flow. As soon as the subject begins to interact with the information received, the act of thinking is already underway. Process and thought are deeply intertwined: the former conditions the latter, and the latter, by selecting, questioning, and modulating the information, feeds back into the flow. This phenomenon is especially visible in today's adaptive systems, which dynamically adjust content based on our interactions.

Thus, the cycle of contemporary thought is not a simple linear progression but a dynamic field where informational flows and reflective activity mutually influence one another. Yet the most significant fact is the virtually unlimited access to information that the system provides—information which inevitably conditions the exercise of pure reason. Faced with this immense torrent, artificial intelligences, when well used, can be powerful allies: tools that help us process, understand, and assimilate information more critically and consciously.

The recognition of ignorance—not as a defect but as a structural limit of our being—will be key along this path. We inhabit, with our senses and our reason, a tiny fragment of an immensely unknown whole, opaque even to mathematics. The aspiration to know truth in its totality is not only pretentious but absurd. And in this sense, we return to one of philosophy's most profound lessons: "I know that I know nothing."

This is, then, an essay for pedestrian thought. Not for the lofty spheres of erudition, but for anyone who wishes to better understand how one thinks and how one is today, in a world where the algorithm comes first.

Chapter I

The World as Measure: The Cartesian Legacy and Its Limits

Cartesian thought established a structure that would profoundly mark the intellectual history of the West: on one side, the thinking subject (*res cogitans*), the center of reflection; on the other, the external world (*res extensa*), conceived as an object of knowledge, ordered and measurable.

The Cartesian method aspired to ground all knowledge in clear and distinct principles. Individual reason was erected as the ultimate arbiter of truth. From this perspective, the enlightened subject confronted an open world, chaotic in appearance, yet susceptible of being understood and ordered through the rigorous exercise of reason.

This project proved extraordinarily fruitful. Thanks to the mathematization of nature, modern science was able to unfold with unprecedented strength. The world ceased to be an unfathomable mystery and became a legible field. Cartesian thought taught us to demand rigor, to value demonstration, to distrust appearances. It also taught us to believe that the world, at its core, was comprehensible.

Yet this paradigm also carried limitations. By centering reason as the exclusive path to truth, it relegated other dimensions of human experience—body, emotion, history, culture—to a secondary plane. The radical separation between subject and object sometimes led to an excessively mechanistic vision of reality.

Moreover, the myth of the absolute neutrality of the observer was eventually revealed to be unsustainable. Science itself showed that our cognition is traversed by biases, emotions, and contexts. No observer is pure. And excessive confidence in closed rational systems at times fueled the rise of ideological dogmatisms. Reason, forgetting its fallibility, was converted into an instrument of domination.

Today, the cognitive architecture in which we live has changed radically. The task that once belonged to the reflective subject—selecting, organizing, and ranking information—has been, to a large extent, externalized and automated. Algorithms have assumed that role.

Before we even think about a subject, external systems have already modeled the field of information in which that thinking will take shape. The selection of content, the hierarchy of versions, the very structuring of our horizon of attention are now profoundly mediated.

Each search query, each interaction on a social network, each recommendation of content activates these invisible processes. The subject continues to think, but does so in a space previously configured. Even before deciding which issues appear relevant, recommendation systems have already prepared the ground, delimiting the field of the thinkable.

What once followed the sequence *cogito* → *known world* is now increasingly *automated process* → *presented world* → *I think*. Thinking occurs within frameworks not fully chosen.

Faced with this panorama, it is urgent to develop a philosophical framework adequate to current conditions. Just as Cartesianism, when misunderstood, sometimes led to dogmatic rationalisms, contemporary thought runs the risk of fostering a blind faith in automated processes.

Flows of information can become tools of manipulation, not because algorithms are intrinsically perverse, but because they reflect biases and respond to structures of power. The thinking subject who is not aware of this mediation remains defenseless before cognitive architectures that invisibly shape his world.

The guiding principle for a philosophy suited to the present can be none other than the explicit recognition of ignorance. More than ninety-five percent of the physical universe is opaque to our knowledge (dark matter and dark energy). We inhabit, with our senses and our reason, a tiny fragment of a whole that not even the most vivid imagination could glimpse.

The aspiration to know truth in its totality is not merely pretentious; it is, ultimately, absurd. In this sense, the principle defended here is not new. It was formulated with admirable clarity twenty-five centuries ago by Socrates, who—without any of our present means—reached one of the most lucid conclusions philosophy has ever given us: *"I know that I know nothing."*

That statement, far from being a gesture of false modesty, expresses precisely the foundation of our perspective: to recognize ignorance as a structural limit of human knowledge. Today, in times of algorithmic flows and automated knowledge, that ancient lesson is more relevant than ever.

What remains is a more modest task, and perhaps a nobler one: to sustain honest lucidity within the limits of our cognitive framework. To operate with humility in that partial space that we can indeed explore. To accept that every claim to ultimate certainty is self-deception.

Our navigation through knowledge resembles that of a basic computer user. We learn to use the programs and interfaces that serve us; we move with some efficacy in the environment presented to us; but it would be absurd to pretend that we master the entirety of the operating system, the hardware, the deep code that makes every interaction possible.

So it is with our reason in relation to reality. We operate with functional models that allow us to live and think within the phenomenal world, without the pretense of comprehending the ultimate structure of the universal system we inhabit.

Accepting this does not mean renouncing thought. On the contrary: it means thinking better. Thinking with humility, with lucidity, with awareness of limits. And being attentive to the misuse of the cognitive tools that today shape our experience.

Only from such humility will we be able to sustain a reason that is truly critical, truly human, in the new post-Cartesian context we inhabit.

Chapter II

Process → I Think → I Exist: Toward a New Architecture of Thought

The Cartesian project situated thinking as the founding act of being. *Cogito, ergo sum* was not merely a logical play; it expressed a profound intuition of the nascent modernity. In thinking, the subject affirmed himself as an autonomous agent before the world.

Today, that order has been profoundly altered. Without most of us perceiving it consciously, thinking now takes place within prior flows of information, conditioned by algorithmic systems that shape what we see, what we read, what we remember, and even what we feel to be relevant or true.

In other words: it is no longer thought that founds our experience of the world, but the process that precedes and molds our thinking.

Hence the need to clearly state the new formula that describes this condition:

process → I think → I exist.

It is important to understand, however, that this model does not describe a rigid linear flow. The process is not a first step absolutely separate from thinking: as soon as the subject begins to interact with the information received, the act of thinking is already underway.

Process and thought are deeply intertwined: the former conditions the latter, and the latter, by selecting, questioning, and modulating the information, feeds back into the flow. This phenomenon is especially visible in today's adaptive systems, which dynamically adjust content according to our interactions.

Thus, the cycle of contemporary thought is not a simple unidirectional progression, but a dynamic field where informational flows and reflective activity mutually influence one another. Yet the most significant fact is the virtually unlimited access to information that the system provides—information that inevitably conditions the exercise of pure reason. Faced with this immense torrent, artificial intelligences, when properly used, can be powerful allies: tools that help us process, understand, and assimilate information more critically and consciously.

Recognizing this structure is essential in order to sustain critical lucidity within the new cognitive architecture. This chapter seeks to explore precisely that architecture: how this process has been configured, how it affects our experience of thinking, and what resources we can cultivate to preserve a truly critical reason in this profoundly mediated environment.

The Shift in Order

The inversion of the Cartesian order that we have sketched is not the result of a grand deliberate plan. It has emerged as an unintended consequence of the digital transformation we are living through.

The contemporary world is saturated with systems that process, filter, and rank the information we consume. Every internet search, every interaction on a social network, every recommendation of content is mediated by complex algorithmic processes that decide, in fractions of a second, what information will reach our consciousness and in what form.

This change is radical. Where once the subject was situated before a world that had to be understood and organized through reason, today that world is presented already filtered, already organized, already narrated. The prior process—often invisible—configures the very phenomenological field in which thinking occurs.

Without awareness of this structure, the risk is clear: to confuse the presented world with the real one, and to accept as our own a thinking that is deeply conditioned.

The formula *process → I think → I exist* does not seek to suggest total determinism, but it does point to a structural condition of contemporary thought: before we even think about a subject, external systems have already modeled the field within which that thinking will take shape.

The Flow Before Thought

The shift in order that we have described—*process → I think → I exist*—is not an abstract phenomenon. It concretely and daily affects the way we think, form opinions, and construct our vision of the world.

A key aspect of this shift lies in the functioning of the flow prior to thought, that is, in the informational ecosystem that precedes and conditions the reflective act.

The volume of data circulating online today is colossal, of a magnitude impossible for individual reason to manage. Faced with this overload, algorithms intervene: filtering, prioritizing, and recommending systems that decide what information reaches our consciousness and in what form. Every search query, every social interaction, every recommendation from a content platform activates these processes. Behind each screen lies an invisible architecture that organizes data according to parameters that combine technical relevance, prior behavior patterns, commercial optimization, and, at times, more or less explicit ideological filters.

This prior flow configures the phenomenological field in which our thinking takes place. We no longer confront an open world, but a presented world, mediated and organized by logics external to pure reason.

The impact of this phenomenon is profound. It does not affect only the information available, but also attention—determining which topics we perceive as relevant or urgent—, collective memory—reinforcing certain narratives and silencing others—, emotions—shaping the intensity

with which certain discourses are experienced—, and the perception of consensus—conditioning which opinions appear majority or marginal.

The contrast with access to information in Descartes's time is telling. For a 17th-century thinker, access to knowledge was arduous and extremely limited. Books were scarce, expensive, and difficult to obtain. Each author represented a particular bias, and navigating that sea of texts required an effort comparable to crossing the Atlantic on a rowboat: slow, uncertain, and fraught with obstacles. Today, by contrast, access is immediate and virtually unlimited. But this abundance does not automatically equate to cognitive freedom. If in the past the challenge was to find information, today the challenge is not to drown in its excess—and above all, not to confuse the flow presented to us with the totality of available knowledge.

Everyday examples abound. When seeking information about a controversial topic, the top search results are not a neutral sample of what exists, but the product of an algorithmic ranking process. On social media, the flow of content we consume does not simply reflect the activity of our contacts, but a construction optimized to maximize our attention span. Even the news we receive, the products recommended to us, and the discourses circulating in our digital environment are shaped by systems whose logic we do not control.

Faced with this panorama, virtually unlimited access to information does not by itself guarantee freer or more lucid thought. On the contrary: without a conscious exercise of critique and selection, the subject risks being thought rather than thinking. The flow prior to thought is today an inescapable reality. The philosophical task consists in understanding its functioning and effects, and in developing the competences necessary to sustain critical reason in this new cognitive landscape.

The New Cognitive Subject

The Cartesian subject conceived of himself as an autonomous agent confronted with a world to be understood. Individual reason was the ultimate arbiter of truth: capable, through method and systematic doubt, of constructing solid knowledge.

Today, that figure has changed profoundly. Not because reason has disappeared, but because the cognitive context in which it operates is radically different. The contemporary subject thinks within mediated systems. His processes of attention, perception, memory, and valuation are deeply conditioned by the flows of information surrounding him. The "open world" faced by the Cartesian subject has been replaced by a "presented world," carefully organized and mediated by algorithmic logics.

This transformation has configured a new kind of experience of thought. Never in human history has an individual been exposed to such a volume of information. This saturation generates a paradoxical phenomenon: the more information available, the harder it becomes to

discern its relevance and veracity. The subject risks skimming the surface of knowledge, trapped in cycles of information consumption without reflective depth.

Moreover, the very perception of the world is now mediated by invisible technological layers. From the news we consume to the opinions we hear, everything passes through automated filters. The subject no longer sovereignly chooses what to know: he interacts with pre-configured flows designed to capture his attention and shape his experience.

To this is added the feedback dynamic characteristic of contemporary adaptive systems. Every click, every pause, every emotional reaction is recorded and used to model future flows. The subject thus participates in a cycle where his own activity reinforces certain patterns of exposure to information, which in turn condition his thoughts and perceptions.

The result is a subject who thinks within a pre-structured framework and who, if unaware of it, risks being shaped more by the informational flow than by an autonomous exercise of reason. The paradox is evident: never have we had more access to information, and rarely have we thought so deeply within a preconfigured frame.

The Cartesian subject aspired to think from a position of rational autonomy. The mixed post-Cartesian subject must learn to think within systems that condition that autonomy. This is, without doubt, a philosophical challenge of the first order. The task is not to idealize a past of pure reason that never truly existed, but to understand the current conditions of thought and to develop a new intellectual ethic in this context.

Without such awareness, the risk is high: the subject may end up reinforcing patterns of thought imposed by the informational flow, rather than sustaining an autonomous exercise of reason. With it, however, it becomes possible to recover significant degrees of agency and critical lucidity.

Thinking Within the Process

Accepting that contemporary thought occurs within mediated systems does not mean resigning ourselves to cognitive passivity. On the contrary: it demands developing an active lucidity that allows us to think within the process, not in spite of it.

The first resource for this is metacognition: the capacity to reflect on one's own processes of thought. To ask from where we are thinking an idea, what sources have shaped our perception, what aspects of the problem we are not seeing because the system does not show them to us. This vigilance over our own thinking is today more crucial than ever. Without it, the risk is to accept as our own ideas and perceptions that have been carefully modeled by external flows.

Alongside this constant reflection on thought, it is indispensable to cultivate critical competence in handling information. The abundance of data does not guarantee deeper understanding; in fact, it may induce the illusion of knowledge. Navigating today's sea of information requires

validating sources, contrasting versions, seeking what is not evident, resisting the logic of the quick click and of immediate emotional gratification. Critical reason must also be informed reason, capable of resisting the automatisms that the digital environment fosters.

But perhaps the most essential element is cognitive humility. Here, the ancient Socratic lesson—*"I know that I know nothing"*—acquires renewed force. In a world saturated with information, the danger is no longer ignorance but false omniscience. Having access to an infinite volume of data can generate the illusion of understanding what, in reality, has barely been touched. Recognizing the limits of our knowledge, maintaining a methodical doubt toward every content, and accepting that there always exists a margin of opacity in the informational process are essential attitudes for sustaining a truly critical reason.

Curiously, artificial intelligences themselves, when well employed, can become allies for this kind of thinking. Used as tools of contrast, synthesis, and dialogical exploration, they allow us to detect inconsistencies, access multiple perspectives, refine questions, and enrich reflection. The risk, of course, lies in their passive use: when AI becomes an unquestioned oracle, an automatic provider of answers. Lucid use implies treating it always as an imperfect interlocutor, as a critical assistant, never as a substitute for human reflection.

From this perspective, computational tools do not replace human reason: they augment it. They constitute a supportive environment that expands our capacity for analysis, enriches the contrast of perspectives, and sustains more rigorous thinking in the face of the complexity of the contemporary world. Augmented reason is no guarantee of lucidity, but it is an opportunity. Well integrated into the reflective process, it can help us be a little less ignorant, a little more critical, a little wiser.

Toward a Philosophy of Augmented Reason

The analysis developed so far allows us to outline a clear horizon: we are not merely facing a crisis of thought, but the emergence of a new mode of thinking. This new mode is mixed by nature. It combines human reason with computational systems that mediate, expand, and condition both access to and processing of information.

The challenge is not to resist this mixture—it would be naïve and futile—but to learn to inhabit it lucidly, with a critical awareness that allows us to seize its opportunities without losing our intellectual agency.

A philosophy of augmented reason must begin with the acceptance of this new condition. When we speak here of augmented reason, we refer to the exercise of human thought that, consciously integrated with computational systems, is capable of expanding its capacities for analysis, contrast, and synthesis without abdicating its critical agency or its humanity. Contemporary reason is not pure—nor was it ever—and today less than ever. It operates within complex informational systems that affect every stage of the cognitive process: from initial perception to

the construction of meaning. Accepting this mixture is not a defeat, but the indispensable starting point for thinking critically in the present.

From this perspective, metacognition must occupy a central place. We cannot afford to think naively. We must integrate into our habits the reflection on our own cognitive processes: asking what a system is showing us, what it is not showing us, what criteria are guiding it, how we are choosing to interact with the flow of information. Without this constant vigilance, the risk of being shaped by the external flow is inevitable.

But a philosophy of augmented reason must not be limited to a defensive stance. It must also reclaim the capacity to seize the opportunities that computational tools provide. Artificial intelligences, recommendation systems, and search engines are, potentially, extraordinary allies for expanding our cognitive horizon, enriching reflection, accelerating analytical processes, and fostering the contrast of perspectives. The risk, as always, lies in abdicating our agency. The key is to preserve our own judgment, not to delegate thinking.

Finally, this philosophy must be animated by profound cognitive humility. In times of informational abundance, the temptation of false omniscience is great. The sheer volume of data can generate an illusion of knowledge that is all the more dangerous the less aware we are of it. Remembering that all knowledge is provisional, that every cognitive process is partial and mediated, is essential for sustaining a truly critical stance.

We are not living the end of thought. We are living the beginning of a new mode of thinking. To inhabit this mode lucidly is the great philosophical challenge of our time. The mixed post-Cartesianism proposed here is a first attempt to name this new condition and to explore its demands. Augmented reason is neither a utopia nor an inevitable threat: it is an opportunity. It is up to us to decide whether we will rise to meet it.

Epilogue

Can such a synergistic coexistence truly exist?

The path I have proposed in this essay does not aim to provide definitive answers. To do so would be contradictory. In a world where information is fluid, where the architecture of thought is in constant transformation, any claim to final closure is illusory.

What I have sought to offer is a framework for reflection. An attempt to understand how we think—and how we are—in times when the algorithm often precedes our very act of thinking. A time when human reason, far from operating in solitude, functions within an environment mediated by computational systems that condition it, but that can also enrich it.

This text is not a finished theory. It is, at best, an invitation to lucidity. To resist both the naïve fascination with new tools and the dogmatic rejection of them. To understand that we are entering a stage of thought that demands new competences, new forms of vigilance, and, above all, a renewed cognitive humility.

The question posed at the outset—*"the algorithm before thinking and being"*—is not resolved here. But I do believe that today, more than ever, the challenge lies in learning to think within the process, with critical awareness, without abdicating our humanity.

And this very essay is a small proof that such coexistence is possible. For this text was conceived and developed precisely in ongoing dialogues between a human being and an artificial intelligence. It has been a reflective process carried out not in the solitude of a room lit by candlelight, but in conversations sustained before a computer, about what I have read and what I have been able to deduce from it—resulting in the reaffirmation of certain ontological stances through the informational complementation of data to which I had not previously had access.

It must also be acknowledged that this horizon of augmented reason is not, as of today, a universal horizon. As a society, we must face the pressing challenge of promoting increasingly unrestricted and equitable access to information, as an indispensable condition for fully realizing this new reality.

This text does not claim to offer a new epistemological theory or to resolve ultimate questions about the nature of knowledge and truth. Its purpose is, more modestly, to explore how to think—and how to be—in the present context, within the real and mediated conditions of our time.

For what matters is not to return to an idealized past, nor to fear the future. What matters is to think better. To think more humbly. And, above all, to think more humanly, in the midst of the overwhelming new reality that surrounds us.